UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
COMMERCE
NEWS
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20230

NATIONAL
OCEANIC AND
ATMOSPHERIC
ADMINISTRATION

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NOAA 02-R100
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Jan. 2, 2002

NOAA ANNOUNCES FUNDING FOR CHANNEL ISLANDS EELGRASS RESTORATION

The Commerce Department s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) announced today the award of $31,757 to facilitate a community-based eelgrass restoration project in California s Channel Islands. The funds awarded to Santa Barbara s ChannelKeeper are given through the Community-Based Restoration Program within the National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries).

We are very excited to support communities in their efforts to restore eelgrass beds to Coastal California, said Rod McInnis, acting regional administrator of NOAA Fisheries for the Southwest Region. This project is a key component in the rehabilitation of habitat essential to the health of our fisheries, and would not be successful without the support and participation provided by the local community.

The ChannelKeeper project is focused on restoring an historic eelgrass bed to Frenchy s Cove on Anacapa Island. Eelgrass, a type of seagrass, grows in beds in shallow bays and lagoons, supporting complex food webs, filtering nutrients, and stabilizing sediments. In California, eelgrass beds are nurseries for many common and commercially important fishes such as giant kelp fish, six species of surfperch, senoritas, rockfish, and kelp bass. Eelgrass populations have declined along the mainland due to development, high nutrient levels, and increased water turbidity.

At the Channel Islands, eelgrass is relatively untouched by pollution. However, after the strong El Nino in 1983, a bed at Frenchy s Cove on Anacapa Island was devoured by a population explosion of sea urchins. To date, eelgrass has failed to return to this site, even though urchins have returned to normal densities. The goal is to restore the historic eelgrass bed at Frenchy s Cove, which will help support marine food webs and enhance fish habitat.

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I m really excited by the prospects for the eelgrass restoration project at Frenchy s Cove, Anacapa Island, said Kathy Ann Miller, the education officer at USC s Wrigley Marine Science Center, at Santa Catalina Island. It s a great opportunity to involve the public in a hands-on conservation project, to restore essential, historical habitat, and to do some good science that will serve similar projects in the future.

Under the cooperative agreement with NOAA, Santa Barbara ChannelKeeper will recruit and train volunteer community divers to conduct hands-on restoration and ongoing monitoring of the eelgrass bed at Frenchy s Cove. The project will test two methods of eelgrass restoration: transplanting healthy plants from donor beds and sprouting seeds collected from donor beds and planting them at the site. Volunteers will be trained to monitor the success of the two methods by quantifying eelgrass and sea urchin abundance, and performing fish counts. The project is taking place within the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary, and will be a cooperative effort between ChannelKeeper, the Channel Islands Research Program, and eelgrass experts from several universities.

The Channel Islands Research Program is excited that NOAA recognized the need to evaluate restoration methods for the unique and ecologically important eelgrass meadows that previously enhanced Anacapa Island, said Dr. Jack Engle, program director and associate research biologist at UCSB s Marine Science Institute.

Dr. Richard Ambrose, associate professor at UCLA s School of Public Health, Environmental Health Sciences Program, agrees. Seagrasses form critical habitat for marine fish and invertebrates. Like may other places around the world, seagrasses in California have been declining. Unfortunately, little is known about the seagrass habitats at the California Channel Islands. This project will provide critical information about seagrass ecology as well as helping restore lost seagrass beds, he said.

The NOAA Community-Based Restoration Program (CRP) has been working with community organizations to support locally-driven habitat restoration projects in marine, estuarine and riparian areas since 1996. NOAA-funded projects provide strong on-the-ground habitat restoration components that offer educational and social benefits for people and their communities in addition to long-term ecological benefits for fishery resources. To date, over 400 projects in 25 states have been implemented using NOAA funding and leveraged funding from the CRP s national and regional habitat restoration partners. For more information on the NOAA Community-Based Restoration Program, visit: http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/habitat/restoration.

NOAA s National Marine Fishery Service (NOAA fisheries) is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation s living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement, and the conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat. To learn more about NOAA fisheries, please visit http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov.